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It was nearly 11 p.m. in Baghdad on his second day in Iraq when Rep. Peter Roskam placed a phone call to his suburban Chicago congressional district.

Six thousand people answered.

For more than an hour recently, they peppered the freshman Republican with questions about what he was seeing on his first trip to the front lines of the war roiling Illinois and Washington: What do we do after the troop "surge"? Does Congress know it's dealing with a 4,000-year-old conflict? How are the troops handling the heat?

"We read some reports that say ... the Americans are causing the violence that's going on, because people want us out of their country," a woman named Mary told Roskam mid-call. "And then I've read opposite reports, that actually the Iraqi civilians count on us being there for some sense of stability. What's right?"

"Good question," replied Roskam, who has voted against setting a timeline for withdrawal of U.S. troops. "My perspective is that we, being the United States, are not the provocateurs of jihadism."

The call was a dramatic example of a hot and relatively new technology that's changing how members of Congress connect with constituents, while helping their re-election efforts in the process.

Large-scale conference call

These so-called "telephone town halls" employ computer dialing to invite large -- or in some

cases, smaller and more targeted -- groups of voters to join what is essentially a conference call that often lasts two hours or more. Voters can punch buttons to ask questions, register thoughts on issues or flag themselves for a follow-up call to get help with a Social Security issue or other problems with the federal government.

Lawmakers say the calls multiply the number of constituents they can reach, even when they're trapped in Washington for votes, and give them good insight into the electorate's mood.

A traditional town hall meeting might draw 100 people, said Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), who has conducted 15 telephone town halls in the last year. A good telephone town hall snares a couple of thousand listeners, including 500 or more who stick around for the entire thing -- and if they like, lawmakers can collect politically valuable data on who those listeners are and how they view issues.

"It is complete digital democracy," Kirk said. "Given how busy people are, it's a 21st Century adaptation of a classic American concept of people standing before their congressmen and asking whatever is on their minds."

Telephone town halls began to catch on with Congress members in the run-up to last year's elections. They've gained steam this year as lawmakers adjust to a work schedule that keeps them in Washington more and cuts into time they might spend in their districts.

Some Democrats and Republicans in the Illinois delegation have tried the calls, and others plan to start soon.

Kirk uses a firm based in his district and groups call targets by community. Roskam's 10 calls have included a town hall exclusively geared to senior citizens, which, until his Iraq call, drew the most listeners of any of his calls.

Thousands participate in call

Roskam smashed his record with the call from Baghdad, which he visited. He also went to Ramadi on the last weekend in July as part of a bipartisan congressional delegation.

The call caught constituents at a less-than-prime time: mid-afternoon on a Saturday. But by the time he introduced himself -- "Well hello, this is Congressman Peter Roskam, and I'm talking to you live right now from Iraq" -- about 5,000 people were connected, with more to join in the minutes to follow.

The hourlong call mixed questions from war supporters -- including a woman named Judith who declared, "We should absolutely do whatever [American commander] Gen. [David] Petraeus wants and win this war" -- and critics, including a man who said, "We're involved in a war that we never should have started, and there's probably not a good, honorable way to get out."

The call was not without glitches. Roskam sometimes struggled to hear questions. His phone cut out shortly after he started answering the question about whether Americans were really causing or preventing violence in Iraq.

"I think we may have just lost the congressman," the operator said. Listeners waited about three minutes for him to reconnect. Later, he was disconnected again.

Still, most questions flowed smoothly, and Roskam dubbed the call "a good dialogue."

"Iraq is on a lot of people's minds, obviously," he said in a telephone interview from Germany, on his way back from Iraq. "It helps me to listen. Also, I think people are interested in firsthand observation in Iraq."

But Roskam, Kirk and other lawmakers say Iraq isn't the most popular topic for questioners on their other telephone town halls. The runaway winner in that category, they say, is immigration.